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RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS IMMEDIATE 2447  
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL IMMEDIATE 2067

UNCLAS QUITO 000642

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REFTEL: QUITO 420

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PINS PGOV SNAR MARR MASS KPAO

SUBJECT: Manta FOL - Request for DOS and DOD Financial Support for Media Outreach and ComRel Activities

¶11. The U.S.-Ecuador agreement to allow U.S. counter narcotics operations to be conducted at the Forward Operating Location (FOL) at the Eloy Alfaro Ecuadorian air base in Manta expires in Nov., 2009. President Rafael Correa has publicly stated that he does not intend to renew the agreement. The Mission has formed a Manta Strategy group to implement an 18-month strategic plan to influence Ecuadorian public and political opinion to create an environment more favorable to the possibility of negotiations to renew the FOL agreement. As part of this strategy, the Mission requests DOD and DOS assistance to fund community relations projects in the Manta area, and to conduct a national media campaign.

¶12. (SBU) The Manta community around the FOL is divided on whether the FOL benefits them, and opinion surveys show that up to 60 percent of the wider Ecuadorian public is unaware of or poorly informed about the agreement or the FOL. Our medium-term goal over the next six months is to solidify a clearly positive image of the FOL with the Manta community, the core constituency we need moving forward, and to educate the Ecuadorian general public about how the FOL benefits Ecuador, making negative politicization of the issue more difficult and creating a positive basis of support. Best case scenario would be a softening of Correa's current opposition and the ability to embark on re-negotiation in a more favorable environment.

Even if we fall short of that ultimate goal and are forced to depart, USG interests would be served by having a broad majority of Ecuadorians feel that the ten-year experience of the FOL partnership had been positive and successful.

¶13. (SBU) ComRel Background: The Manta community holds a variety of views on the FOL. On the one hand are those who see unfulfilled potential and negative affects - they think that the FOL did not make Manta into the Ecuadorian Miami as they thought would happen, believe it has increased drug trafficking and prostitution in the area, and caused the sinking of local fishing boats on which the community depends for jobs and income. On the other hand are those who see benefits - increased domestic flights and tourism through the renovated Manta airport (co-located with the FOL and Eloy Alfaro Air Base), and the effects of the \$6.5 million that the FOL injects into the local economy through fuel purchases and 150 local jobs. Manta leaders, including the mayor and officers of the Chamber of Commerce, can make both arguments in public. Immediately after the election of President Correa, who openly opposes FOL agreement renewal, Manta leaders stopped publicly supporting the FOL, though in private they stated that their community has many needs and that contributions from the FOL would be welcome, would help them publicly support the FOL, and would improve the FOL's image in the community. Over the past six weeks, however, these Manta leaders' tune has changed, as our intensive informational efforts via

interviews and journalist visits to the FOL have begun to pay off. Manta mayor Jorge Zambrano and other local officials have stepped forward and made very positive comments about the FOL in TV interviews, saying that its counter narcotics actions benefit both countries. Recognizing that the prospect of a U.S. departure is real, some Manta politicians are now pushing for a local referendum to put the following question to a popular vote: "Do you want the FOL to stay in Manta?" The referendum, if it happens, would significantly influence national public opinion, as well as the opinion of the GOE and the Ecuadorian Congress, about FOL renewal.

**14. ComRel Request:** Mission requests funding for the following community relations projects to assist the Manta community surrounding the FOL over the next eighteen months. Each request will be carried out in conjunction with one of the three Manta community leaders who the Mission and the FOL commander have identified as most likely to influence public opinion either in favor of or against the FOL in the next eighteen months. The social projects will benefit the children of Manta and their families, and will help these three leaders deliver improvements to their constituencies and their community, giving them a way to speak positively about how the FOL is investing in the people of Manta. This ComRel effort will be branded ("FOL Helping Manta") via billboards, signs, stickers and in media interviews to create maximum awareness among citizens of Manta. This COMREL will come at a time when USAF-ECUAF mil-to-mil relations are improving and presents an opportune time for collaboration with the community of Manta.

--**Mayor of Manta - Primary Education Assistance:** In Ecuador it is the responsibility of students and their parents to buy school textbooks, even in public schools. City governments often purchase the textbooks for poor students. To assist underprivileged Manta school children and their parents, many of whom live in

neighborhoods surrounding the FOL, the Embassy will team with the mayor of Manta to provide textbooks for the city's elementary school children in academic year 2007, which begins April 2. The books will be delivered in a backpack labeled with a FOL logo and will have stickers identifying them as donations of the USG and the FOL. Requested amount: US\$150,000.

--**President of Manta Chamber of Commerce - Social Infrastructure Construction:** The president of the Manta Chamber of Commerce, Lucia Fernandez, is a very influential Manta power broker who speaks for the Manta business community and is a likely candidate to replace Zambrano as mayor. Currently she is an ally of the Embassy who wants to help us rally support for the FOL, which she believes has contributed favorably to Manta's development over the past eight years, during which time Ecuadorian airlines have tripled the number of commercial flights to Manta airport and a Hong Kong company won a \$450 million concession to construct a new international seaport. Fernandez has identified the need to construct child care facilities, and to improve local schools around the FOL as a way to garner support among the local population. The Embassy will team with the Chamber to fund the construction of a series of child care centers, and to fund improvements to local schools (bathrooms, soccer fields, paint, etc) in the city of Manta. We have received and prioritized specific funding requests that total: US\$200,000.

--**New Commander of Ecuadorian Air Base - Children's Health Services:** On March 2 Ecuadorian Air Force Colonel Eduardo Cardenas assumed command of the Eloy Alfaro Air Base, which hosts the FOL. Already Cardenas has shown a friendliness towards the FOL and a willingness to work productively with us. The Ecuadorian base recently stood up a Disabled Children's Rehabilitation Center, which serves the needs of base children and children from the Manta community. The FOL Commander will partner with Col. Cardenas to equip the Center, begin equestrian rehabilitation therapy, and invite a U.S. rehabilitation expert to visit Manta for consultations. The Eloy Alfaro Base also holds a community open house every June to celebrate Ecuador's Children's Day. The FOL will partner with the Eloy Alfaro base to hold a joint open house in June for the Manta community to allow the FOL to receive Manta children and their families for a U.S.-style picnic and day of kids' games and rides. Finally, in conjunction with the Kentucky National Guard, the FOL and the Eloy Alfaro air wing will offer free dental sealing services to Manta children.

Requested amount: US\$50,000.

¶15. National Media Outreach Campaign Request: The Ecuadorian public outside of Manta has limited awareness and largely inaccurate information about the FOL. To fill that information gap and create a positive environment for continued counter-narcotics cooperation at the FOL through 2009, as well as - in the best case scenario - a realistic opportunity to engage the GOE on renewal of the agreement, the Mission requests funding to conduct a two-month paid national media campaign in 2007. Through consultations with the local offices of an international public relations firm, Embassy proposes a campaign to include the production and purchase of 190 print spots in Ecuador's six national newspapers, six regional newspapers, and two national magazines. The print campaign would accompany a smaller television campaign of twenty public service announcements that would be aired on national networks as part of our ongoing partnership with national networks for assistance in disseminating the USG's message regarding the FOL. The campaign would include production of television spots and a radio spot that can be distributed through our existing network of 85 radio affiliates situated throughout Ecuador. The local PR firm will provide its design and advising services pro bono, but purchasing the media space will cost: US\$400,000.

¶16. The USG spent \$71 million on initial infrastructure improvements to create the Manta FOL. Developing a new alternative site would presumably have a similar cost. A US\$800,000 investment now can potentially position the USG to be able to conduct negotiations on the FOL renewal which, if successful, will allow us to sustain current operations and avoid the large expense of creating a new FOL to replace the one in Manta. A response is urgently needed to this request, as time is passing quickly and the need to generate momentum for potential renewal talks is upon us. If we don't act quickly to implement the strategy, a critical opportunity will pass us by.

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